PowerBase best for data base applications

With dozens of data-base programs available for the IBM PC and compatible small computers, which is best for your business tasks? In this week's column, I'll review three of the most popular "relational" data-base programs (those that minimize duplication of data), and one non-relational best-seller.

Last week, I discussed the difference between relational and non-relational systems. But here's a quick summary to refresh your memory:

First, remember that the basic tenet of relational systems is that it is wasteful to repeat the same information — over and over again — throughout the data base. If you are entering orders into your computer, for example, you don't want your data base to contain the client's name and address for every invoice prepared for that client. That's how non-relational systems operate, resulting in staggering duplication.

Instead, you want your computer program to "relate" your client file with your invoice file, so that the client file contains all the client information just once and each invoice record merely contains the client number. Then, when you print out your invoices, the computer creates the *illusion* that the data is actually stored within the invoice record by referring to the other file and listing that information.

Systems set up this way are typically less prone to error, less expensive to maintain, and — on the negative side — more difficult to set up.

pfs:File easiest to learn

Despite the advantages of relational systems, non-relational programs like *pfs:File* probably outsell relational ones by about 4 to 1 for use on small computers.

pfs:File ($140) is an outstanding program that I've recommended many times, and it

that I've recommended many times, and it seems to be universally popular. In fact, non-data processing people find it so easy to use that they frequently neglect to move to relational programs — even when it's economical to do so.

Happily, most relational programs can convert pfs:File files to their own format, so there's little excuse not to change when the application warrants. Where there's minimum data that would be duplicated, pfs:File is an excellent "starter program."

Until recently, relational programs were difficult to set up and typically required the ongoing attention of a programmer or consultant to keep them going. Many smaller companies can't justify having a fulltime programmer on staff just to maintain their data base.

dBase and R:base are complicated

Of the relational programs available, dBase II (and its successor, dBase III — list $695) has the lion's share of the market. It is a powerful programmer's tool but much too complicated for non-data processing personnel to use to develop their own applications. It is essentially a programming language. But after an application is fully developed, the difficult parts can be virtually invisible to the end-user.

The second most popular relational program is R:base 5000, which also sells for about $700. Some experts think it's better than dBase III in many respects. Though the developers tried to make it easier to use than dBase III, it still is exceedingly complex and not an end-user product. Like dBase III, I would not recommend that non-dp trained people use it to develop their own applications.

PowerBase is a winner

PowerBase ($395) is a relatively new and unknown relational data-base program that I predict will become very popular in the future. It is the easiest relational program I've used, and may be suitable for non-dp trained users to try to program themselves. Of course, any programming process that requires linking files and defining relationships between them can be complicated, but PowerBase is the only one I've tried that even stands a chance of succeeding if you're determined to "go it alone."

In addition to having all the expected features of a good relational data-base program, there are two aspects that make PowerBase unusual:

✔ First, it has an exceedingly good manual, with a superb tutorial section. After reviewing literally dozens of data-base programs over the years — for use on mainframes, minis and micros — this one stands out as the best of the lot.

✔ Second, PowerBase has a very handy feature called "Zoom" that is absent on all other systems I've tested. It allows you to instantly jump to a related file based upon a number that is common to both files. This can be done by simply typing a pre-defined "zoom" key. This is very unusual. Other relational programs may allow the programmer to set up such jumps, but in a way that is not as easy to use for (say) your order clerk or bookkeeper.

Getting started in this area is not easy, and the September issue of my Executive Computing newsletter outlines the steps to determine, first, if you need a relational or nonrelational system; and second, which one is best for you.

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